

A MONTANA MYSTERY

BY SEWARD W. HOWES

This Story Was Commenced Sunday, December 18.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.
Overlaid by a Montana blizzard, Cayright, a surveyor, seeks shelter at a friend's cottage. He finds the friend, a man named Hubbs, and his wife murdered. As he is about to go to help Hubbs's daughter Nellie arrives and charges him with the murder of her parents. She tells him that her father, Judge Gordon, has been murdered and that she is the only one who knows the murderer. She asks him to help her find the murderer and to protect her from the law. She tells him that she is the only one who knows the murderer and that she is the only one who knows the murderer. She asks him to help her find the murderer and to protect her from the law.

CHAPTER VII (Continued).

He sat there when Nelson and his companions entered. A mild resentment showed in his face when the men merely spoke casually to Nellie, and then, with an air of authority and proprietorship, began their preparations to carry away the bodies of Hubbs and his wife. But this look faded away into a half smile when old Crooked Ears took a seat by his side.

He was not alone. There were two, then, who would shed their blood for Nellie.

"We've been sent by Sheriff Gavin," said Nelson, evidently in charge of the party. "Gavin didn't know just what you wanted done, but thought likely you would want them buried right in Hubbs' place."

"I suppose that is best," replied Nellie. "You know what to do better than I. You have been through these scenes before."

"I should say so," said Nelson, with something like pride. "This ain't no new to Hubbs. But what will you do? You oughtn't to stay here alone."

"But I must stay. What else is there for me to do? The place needs some one."

"It ain't good to be alone here," persisted Nelson. "You'll be gettin' married. There's Gavin."

Nellie turned away in disgust, and allowed them to continue without interference.

She went to the kitchen, where Joe followed.

"Can't hurt him," said Crooked Ears. "Him dead."

"I know," said Nellie. "They cannot hurt him, Joe. But they hurt me. The fists of Hubbs and his wife. Nellie! Hurt a friend of Alice Gordon's? What was needed to prevent this?"

"Not that way, Joe," said Nellie, understanding his feelings. "They would not harm me. But they are rude men and do not understand."

"Can't hurt him," said Joe, jerking his thumb toward the front of the house. "Him dead."

By "him" Joe meant both the bodies lying there.

Something in his tone caused Nellie to look at him sharply.

"Can't hurt him," said Joe again. "Him dead."

This last was emphasized, and whispered. The dark thumb made a quick jerk toward the direction of Hubbs' place.

Nellie, without knowing what he meant, felt that his words were significant.

"You like him?" he asked in a whisper, his thumb jerking again toward Hubbs' place.

Nellie knew instinctively that he meant Cayright.

She could not at that time enter into a lengthy explanation of her feelings toward Cayright. In fact, she did not exactly understand them herself.

She blushed at Joe's question. That was because she understood Joe.

"Gavin tell him that the young man kill him." Another jerk toward the front of the house. "Him say that Judge Gordon want to punish such a man for politics. See? Joe can't vote. But Joe hears much around. Gavin him say Judge Gordon want to get high office. The young man have good friends, and they help Gordon if Gordon help him."

"Yes, yes," said Nellie.

"So Gavin him say the young man be punished while Gordon him away."

Nellie turned deathly white. She knew it was a crime that Joe was leading up to.

"How will they punish him, Joe?" Joe glanced around furtively.

"Tonight—when all people sleep—they take him from Mose at the lockup. They pretend Gavin protect him, but Gavin help."

"But what will they do?" asked Nellie, almost foreseeing the answer she would get.

"Hang him," said Joe, who knew how to crawl toward a disclosure, but not how to soften it when it came.

"Hang him? Hang Mr. Cayright?" She backed, sick and faint, against the table. Joe stood mutely waiting.

With a supreme effort, she pulled herself together.

"Joe," she said, "we must help him. Are there not men in Hubbs' place who can trust?"

"Not when the judge away. Gavin him control everything."

"Then, if we cannot save him by an appeal to justice, we must resort to methods of our own. Joe, will you help me?"

"That what we come for," he said. The almost distracted girl took a few steps around the kitchen, and she glanced across the great expanse of melting snow.

"Joe," she said, halting before him, "if Mr. Cayright could escape from the lockup, could he get away?"

Joe's finger pointed to the snow-covered earth.

"How?" he asked. "Where him good go. Then Gavin have good excuse. Kill him for breaking away from lockup."

"That's so," moaned the girl, wringing her hands. "Oh, God! tell me what to do!"

Swiftly she thought, and, as if in response to her heart-spoken prayer, an inspiration came to her.

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this question. His service was of the kind that had not called for a talent in smiling.

He knew the way to the dugout. But the ground was covered with snow. The snow was melting. A cat would leave tracks that would last till the drifts.

"Can't you think of some way of getting from the house to the dugout without tramping all the way through the fresh snow?" she asked.

"Sometime I tank it," replied Charlie. "Sometime I tank we go down by 'da road an' tak da made track. Da horses nak da track to da town. Da creek not froze hard, an' da ice brak many tam. We walk in da creek an' leave no track."

"Ah!"

"Da creek run near da hill there house. I not been in it since da snow come."

"Then there is not a footprint near it."

"No, if da sheep not come to it."

"But even they would tramp out the footprints. It is good, Charlie. I want to hide the man there. Will you help me?"

"I will die for you. I tell nobody anything."

"Then the first thing to do is to carry some food there. I will get it now."

With swift movements of precision, now she knew her way, the girl went about her task.

A great jug of strong coffee was prepared. Even cold, it had good qualities. Canned meats were placed in a basket, and two loaves of bread she had baked the day before.

A bottle of whiskey was added, and with a thought of creature comforts that would have brought a smile to an older connoisseur, one of Joe Hubbs' newest pipes and a big bag of tobacco.

A box of matches, and a few other odds and ends she thought might be useful, were also stored away.

"Now, Charlie," she said, "carry these to the dugout, and take along some blankets. Make it as comfortable as you can."

"Yes," said Charlie, as he rolled up two thick blankets and shouldered them. "I tank da man have nice place for hide."

"Wait!"

From another room she brought a rifle and ammunition.

"I shall not need it, Charlie, with you to guard me. Take them to the dugout."

"Yes, I tank da man not better shoot. Noise mak da men hear."

"Only to defend his life, Charlie."

"Yes, da good enough."

It was dark when Charlie started off, but he knew the way. It could not be totally dark with so much snow.

He did not loiter. He was soon lost to sight from the house.

Then Nellie flung herself on the couch and the reaction came. She wept violently, and sobbed and prayed. But she had not lost courage. She was only a woman.

The night was darker in Hubbs' place than on the prairies. There were trees there, and the snow was by this time blackened with the mud by the tramp of many horses.

Miners had come and gone out again. The excitement of the murder had put everybody in motion. It was hard to find a clean drift near Hubbs' place.

Old Crooked Ears left the road and crossed an unfenced field, which brought him to a grove of ash. Here he tethered Jenny, the mare, and continued his journey.

Mose, the halfbreed, was sitting in his cupboard of a dwelling in one end of the lockup, smoking placidly and wondering when the men would come.

He had received a half-penny warning that if anything happened that night it was worth his while to yield gracefully. It would cost him his life to resist.

When he heard the crunch of a horse outside he put down his pipe and stepped to the door. It was only Crooked Ears.

"How?" he grunted, as the halfbreed came out.

"Hello, Joe."

Joe was his uncle, but family relations did not count much in the amenities of that region.

"Anybody come?" asked Joe.

"No. Heard anything?"

"Yes. Gavin want the man hung up before the judge get back."

"Gavin, eh?" said Mose with a start. "Gavin no like him because him like Hubbs little girl. Him think to kill the man before Gordon get back, because him no got proof that him killed Hubbs."

"Huh!"

"I like like Gavin. I like Gordon. I like Hubbs girl. What you like?"

"I like to be let alone," said Mose. "What the devil are they doing, with their lynchings and deviltry? Gordon's a judge. He'd see the right done."

"Gavin no want the right done. Gavin like the wrong. Him want get this man killed so get Nellie Hubbs. See?"

"Huh!"

"What you do now? I come to get him out."

"Eh?"

Mose stared at the Indian.

"What you do? You like be good with Gavin or not?"

"Go to the devil! I'm good with anybody."

"You want Gavin like you or me kill you?"

"Eh! That's different," said Mose, reaching for his revolver.

But the iron hand of the Indian had held him by the throat.

"Don't make noise," hissed Crooked Ears. "I no hurt you. But I kill you if you cry out."

"Oh, shut up," said Mose in disgust. "I'm no friend of Gavin's. If you want the chap, let him out. But fix me up so I can tell a likely tale."

He handed his revolver to Joe.

"Shoot me in the arm, and then tie me up."

"Devil, no. The shot will bring Gavin."

"Then tie me up good and chuck me under the table like I had a knock on the head."

Swiftly a rope was brought, and Joe's nimble fingers wound it around the inert arms and legs of his willing prisoner.

Joe took his relative and dragged him into his room, where there was a fire.

"Now I go," he said.

"Take the key, idiot," said Mose.

Joe took it from the nail on which it hung.

Cayright was moodily waiting for something to turn up, when the Indian entered. Some light came in through the chinks between the logs, feeble rays from the lantern in the keeper's quarters.

"The sheriff!" added Nelson quite superfluously. But he wanted to do his duty.

A curtain was drawn aside after a few minutes' waiting, and Nellie's white face looked out.

"She's scared to death," said Grimes.

"I'll bet a dollar she doesn't know the chap's escaped."

"The devil she don't!" growled Gavin.

The white face disappeared from the window, and the door was opened.

"What is it? What do you want?" asked Nellie.

The sleepy eyes of Charley Ox glowed ominously behind her.

"Let us in," said Gavin. "We won't eat you. That man has gone."

"What man?" asked Nellie, clasping her hands.

"Oh, you know what man. That chap you are so sweet on after he killed your father and mother. It may please you to know he's done another murder. He killed Mose, the halfbreed keeper."

"No, no! Impossible!" gasped Nellie, the time wringing her hands in real horror.

"Yes," said Gavin. "We heard a rumour at the jail and went there. We found Mose dead with a knife stuck in his ribs. We tracked the fellow this far. Where is he?"

Gavin spoke roughly. Grimes thought he was making a mistake. But Gavin was the kind of a man who never believed he could make mistakes.

Nellie looked from one to the other of the three. When Gavin had said they tracked Cayright to the farm she had seen a fleeting smile on Nelson's face. She took courage from that smile.

"Now, Sheriff Gavin," she said, speaking as calmly as though she had asked simply for a glass of water, "please discontinue this abuse, and explain why you have disturbed me at this unreasonable hour. I should have supposed that after all I had been through, I might receive some consideration."

"Nellie," answered the sheriff, somewhat abashed by her calm, firm voice and manner, "I am simply doing my duty. I'm sheriff of this county. When a crime's been done, it's my duty to get the criminal. That's all I am doing now."

That fellow I arrested here for the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Hubbs has killed another man and escaped. It is my business to find him. If it is within your power to assist, it is your duty."

"You accuse me of harboring him. The house is at your disposal. You are at liberty to search it from end to end. Go to the barns and sheds. If you find him, take him."

It was a convincing speech. It convinced Nelson and Grimes, but not Gavin. He knew more about Nellie's determined spirit than they did.

"I accept the invitation," he said.

Thereupon began a search such as that house had never seen before, and few houses ever do see.

They upturned furniture. They ransacked closets. They pulled beds apart. They upset everything. But they did not find the fugitive.

"He isn't in the house. Let's get a lantern and go to the buildings."

They hunted with the lantern till the lantern was no longer needed. Charley Ox followed them about with itching fingers.

With what joy could he have throttled these men who were causing his mistress all this annoyance!

"There's one thing we've forgot," said Grimes. "If this chap is hidden here, he can't on horseback. He couldn't do it on foot and get here ahead of us. Now, where's the horse he rode?"

"That's so," said Nelson. "These horses belong here. His horse it at Hubbs' place."

The sheriff was nonplussed. He stood in the door of a shed and scanned the broad acres.

Not a piece of hewed timber showed above the ground except those in the buildings they had examined.

"Well," he said, "if he isn't here now, he will be. We must work a game."

"Well," said Nellie, who was preparing breakfast.

"I must beg your pardon, Nellie," said the sheriff. "I may have seemed ugly, but I did not mean to be. I believe now the man is not here. We must go and find him."

"Well," she smiled. "His face was still white, but she felt reassured."

"Your work is exhausting," she said with just the slightest irony. "Will you not have a cup of coffee before you go?"

"We will," Nellie. You are kind to think of it."

They refreshed themselves and remounted.

"Good-by, Nellie. You'll forgive me, won't you?" asked Gavin.

"A man needs no forgiveness for performing his duty," she answered coldly.

They rode away. Nellie watched them for a while, and then went about her work.

There was much to be thought of on the farm. A half dozen herders were out in different directions with their cattle. These must be communicated with to see what losses the storm had caused.

Perhaps some of them had perished in the snow. Charley Ox was the only one who had put in an appearance. Upon him she must depend to do it all.

"Charlie, have they gone quite out of sight?" she asked.

"They're somewhere. But I hear de tail man say a tang about da game. I tank da came back."

"What shall I do? What can I do?" she moaned. And then, as she saw the judge riding up the lane to the house, she saw also that his face was white and set. He had already heard the story. He had met Gavin on the way.

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